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CHAPTER VII

BIRTH AND ADOPTION

BIRTH

Physiological Paternity. Length of Gestation

842 THOUGH it is said that the creator-deity Ta-ghar begets all children on the moon, whence they fall down and use the mother's womb only as a portal by which to issue on to the earth,[1] this is a purely symbolical statement, and there is no doubt whatever that the natives are fully aware of the fact of physiological paternity. Even were it taken literally, the legend itself shows the recognition of the male function, and in point of fact the natives know as well as we do that sexual intercourse is a necessary preliminary to pregnancy. Whether or to what extent the part played by the semen is recognised, however, I am unable to say, and the natives' own calculations regarding the duration of pregnancy are based entirely on the date at which the menstrual flow ceases. My informant told me that a child may be born during the 8th, 9th or 10th moon after the last menstrual period, or sometimes even as late as the 12th, but that the best time for it to come was during the 9th or 10th. It must be remembered that the "moon" or "lunar period" is roughly 29½ days. This reckoning agrees substantially with our own, according to which a child is expected 9 "lunar months" of 28 days each after conception, which is equivalent to 9½ lunar months after the last menstrual period.

Pregnancy

843 That the natives are also aware of the time when the child within the womb may be expected to "turn" is shown by the fact that seven moons after it is seen that a woman is pregnant she is attended by a female expert, who later acts as midwife and is acquainted with all the magic songs and processes connected with birth. This woman is called *vene na man*. *Vene* means "woman" and *na man* magic (or medicine). These two now go to the shore, where the expectant mother takes off the rope-girdle (*na-tuwe*), of plaited string (*tel*) made of the inner bark of the *malaok* tree and so called *tel malaok*, which every woman wears beneath her mat-skirt around her waist, whereon the midwife winds a new and

[1] See pp. xx, 212.

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776 grow. He gives us our food in the gardens and on the trees. He is good, he never wishes us harm. He's very different from Le-hev-hev." [1]

The interlocutor refuses to be drawn at this point into a discussion about Le-hev-hev, and says, "Let us go on about Ta-ghar. Where does he walk? Where is he?"

Here follows an inconclusive attempt on the part of Godefroy to extract information about a vaguely conceived sky-world, which will be referred to below. Finally, having warded this off, Melteg-lil-nale at last said:

"Ta-ghar lives in the moon. It is he who makes it shine, so that it may illumine the night for our ceremonies, for our walks, our hunting and our fishing, and our sea-voyages."

Asked why he and his ancestors thought that Ta-ghar lived in the moon, he said, "Because we see him there. . . . You too, everyone can see him! When the moon is full, you must surely have seen a black thing in the middle of its disc. Look at it closely, and you will see that it is like a man."

His questioner then told him of the European notion of "the man in the moon," who brings a bundle of faggots with which to warm the moon and make it shine.

"Well," said Melteg-lil-nale, "that same thing that your ancestors call 'the man in the moon,' we say that it is Ta-ghar, and, like you, we say he causes the moon to shine."

"What does he do there?"

Begets human children on the moon, which is called "grandmother."

[842] "He brings it about that it is the moon that gives birth to all men. Every child born on the earth falls from the moon, and sees daylight as soon as it has passed through its mother's womb.[2] In the moon, which we call our grandmother,[3] there are children who have only just begun; after a time they fall to earth and become men."

"Does what you are telling me now apply to white men as well as to the men of Vao?"

[1] Le-hev-hev, ferocious guardian of the life after death, is dealt with in the next section.

[2] Among the Big Nambas it is said that "the world and all things in it, including mankind, were created by the moon . . . but the man who gave this information denied that there was any cult of the moon in this tribe" (Deacon, 4, p. 46). In Matanavat, on the North coast of Malekula (according to Harrisson, 2, p. 41), it is said that "the moon shapes the child in the womb. Each new coming of the new moon is the time for such shaping." In Seniang, "the marks on its surface, 'the man in the moon,' are supposed to be the afterbirth, and at the first full moon after delivery the people will point to it and say to the mother: 'Look, there is the placenta.' The moon is also supposed to form the features of children" (Deacon, 4, p. 235). These beliefs are, however, in quite a different category from the official sun and moon cults in Epi and the Southern New Hebrides.

[3] It is not stated to which grandmother he refers.